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ABSTRACT

Bounded on the west and south by Mexico and to the east by the Gulf, the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas is separated from the nearest U.S. urban center of any size by miles of flat and arid brushland. Its total population of approximately 335,000 is essentially composed of 2 groups--Mexican Americans and Anglos. Although the region is one of the most productive agricultural centers in the nation, poverty tends to be pervasive within the Valley. Some of the nations most severe socioeconomic conditions are indigenous to the region. Focusing on the Valley's poverty, this paper briefly describes some of the more serious local economic problems, particularly as they relate to the Mexican American population. Some of the historical antecedents and contemporary conditions which have either precluded or hindered upward social mobility among the poor are briefly considered. The paper concludes with a discussion of proposals suggested for the facilitation of regional socioeconomic development. (NQ)

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Poverty and Problems of Development in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas*

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The Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas is a region of paradox. A river, a fertile delta plain, and a semi-tropical climate are the natural ingredients enabling it to be one of the most productive agricultural centers in the U. S. Yet, also indigenous to the Valley are some of the nation's most severe socioeconomic conditions. Hidalgo, for example, largest of the three Valley counties, annually leads the state in total farm income. However, it has the dubious distinction of being a leader in another respect. Hidalgo has the lowest per capita income level of any SMSA in the U.S. Cameron, the other major county, fares little better, ranking third from the bottom.

Valley poverty will be the focus of this paper. Specifically, I will attempt to briefly describe some of the more serious local economic problems and particularly their relation to the Mexican-American population. Of similar concern will be a delineation of the various barriers which at this time tend to either preclude or hinder upward social mobility among the poor. The paper will conclude with a discussion of proposals suggested for the facilitation of regional socioeconomic development.

The Situation

The Valley, an approximately seventy by thirty mile oasis strip, is positioned at the extreme tip of Texas along the lower Rio Grande. Bounded on the west and south by Mexico and to the east by the Gulf, it is separated from the nearest U. S. urban center of any size by miles of flat and arid brushland.

The total population of the area numbers approximately 335,000 (Hidalgo = 180,000; Cameron = 140,000; Willacy = 16,000). Brownsville, a heavily commercialized bordertown in Cameron County, is the largest city containing slightly over 50,000 residents. Originally an outgrowth of the Mexican city of Matamoros and

later incorporated in the early 1850's after U. S. conquest, Brownsville's economic existence continues to be closely tied to trade with Matamoros and the Mexican interior. Other Valley towns, however, are relatively recent creations and are heavily dependent upon activities centering around agricultural production. Cities such as McAllen, Harlingen, Edinburg, Pharr, Weslaco, and Mission were founded after the completion of railroad lines in 1905. By linking the Valley to northern markets, the railroad consequently stimulated the settlement of Midwestern farmers and the development of agricultural industries.

Most of the farming communities are located along the east-west Highway 83 (locally referred to as "the nation's longest main street") and are spaced at about five-mile intervals. Also running parallel to Highway 83 is a railroad line which, in an historical sense, served as the demarcation for residential segregation: Mexican Americans lived north of the tracks, Anglos south. Ethnic housing separation, however, has not been rigidly enforced since World War II. Nevertheless, the "tracks," symbolically, and for the most part physically, still separate the two groups. Commonly found north of the tracks are canning plants, packing sheds, warehouses, and a predominantly Mexican-American commercial and residential area. To the south, lie the major business district and the well-kept streets lined with palms and the more expensive homes.

Within the Valley are also a large number (approximately 100) of unincorporated settlements lacking such standard amenities as potable water, sewerage service, and electricity. These <u>colonias</u> are dispersed throughout the area, being located both in close proximity to cities and in relative isolation; and range in size from 15 to 3,000 residents. Generally reflecting the

poorest living conditions in the Valley, they contain almost 60,000 Mexican Americans. According to the Lower Rio Grande Development Council:

> Colonias are populated by the "Poorest of the Poor," usually newly arrived immigrants (there is a constant and undetermined in-migration from Mexico), migrant workers, and the unskilled. Those who choose to live in a colonia do so for a variety of reasons, including lack of housing in urban areas, the desire to own a home, lower tax rates, the come-on by developers, and ignorance... For the rest of the people in the Valley, the problem of the colonias has become a weighty moral issue. One thing that is usually agreed upon is that unscrupulous developers must be stopped from further creating more of the same type of housing.[1]

Any discussion of the Valley also should include mention of the two large Mexican cities lying just across the river - Matamoros (est. pop. 150,000) and Reynosa (est. pop. 125,000). Important commercial and tourist centers, the high level of interdependence between these cities and the Valley is undeniable. Both cities have undergone tremendous growth in recent years: e.g. between 1940 and 1960, the Matamoros population increased by 164%.[2] Pushed from the interior by chronic economic depression, some of these newcomers have found jobs in emerging industries. Most have not, however, as unemployment currently is estimated to be over 40%. The consequences of this problem for the Valley will be discussed in the next section.

The Valley population is essentially composed of two groups. Roughly 78% are of Mexican ancestry and 22% are Anglo.[3] While poverty is pervasive within the region (e.g. the Hidalgo SMSA per capita income in 1972 was only $2,343 - roughly half the national average), it is not evenly distributed between ethnic groups. Mexican Americans are a numerical majority, but they are, by and large, a social minority: one grossly over-represented within the lowest socioeconomic categories. Onver 55% of the Mexican-American population falls below the poverty line; while among Anglos less than 20% are so classified. And if we dare project on the basis of past trends, we may

predict that poverty increasingly will become a Brown phenomenon as the absolute and relative size of the stable Anglo population decreases. Between 1960-1970, for example, the number of Anglos dropped from 110,000 to less than 75,000 (a reduction of over 30%) while the absolute increase among Mexican Americans was over 10%.

Not unexpectedly given the above poverty figures, educational attainment is also commensurately low. For those over twenty-five, median school achievement is only slightly above four grades. Almost 75% of adult Mexican Americans have less than nine years of schooling. And the proportion of highly educated Mexican Americans is extremely low: less than 4% hold college degrees.

Agriculture traditionally has been and continues to serve as the Valley's primary export base. Direct employment in agriculture, however, has dramatically decreased over recent years due to growth in the retail and service sectors, decline in the amount of cultivated land, and very importantly, increasing farm mechanization. Since 1962 the amount of seasonal farm jobs has dropped 63%. While year-round farm jobs have increased by over 35% statewide, such work has diminished by 3% in the Valley. Yet, this slack has not been taken up through the creation of a sufficient number of non-farm jobs. Although non-agricultural employment has risen 43% since 1962 in Texas, the regional increase has been less than 25%. Furthermore, between 1960-1970 the Valley suffered extreme losses in manufacturing employment, declining 21% in Hidalgo and 7% in Cameron. Agriculture, therefore, is still an important source of work. The farm labor force presently ranges from about 20% in May to about 12% in August. And when the jobs which are indirectly but intimately tied to farming are considered (such as employment in canneries, warehouses, implement sales and maintenance, etc.), it is clear that agriculture

still commands the most significant role in the local economy.

Regional unemployment historically has been about twice that of the state in general. In 1972 Valley unemployment averaged 7%; today it is officially more than 10%. And it must be stressed that these are the official rates compiled by the state employment commission according to a number of rather strict criteria. Present unemployment is probably much closer to 20%.

Illustrative of the severe lack of job opportunities, particularly those providing year-round employment, is the tremendously large number of farm laborers who, during the summer, leave the Valley to work northern crops. Approximately 90,000 residents are now engaged in migrant agriculture. This figure accounts for about one-tenth of the U. S. total. However, this number will undoubtedly diminish in the future as farmers continue to mechanize. In fact, in the last five years, many migrants have found no employment or only highly sporadic employment; and many reports have filtered back to Texas of whole families running out of money and virtually being stranded in rural Midwestern communities. Then too, numerous families hoping to find stable and better paying jobs, continue to purposely settle out of the migrant stream into areas outside the Valley.

As previously alluded to, housing is a critical local problem. Almost one quarter of the currently occupied housing units lack either piped-in water, hot water, flush toilet, or bathing facilities (compared with 5% for Texas). Over 30% of the families live in over-crowded units (compared with 9% statewide). In recent years, housing has become even more pressing as increasing numbers (now estimated at 250,000) of "winter Texans," i.e., retired Anglos primarily from the Midwest and Canada, have taken advantage of the Valley's mild November - April climate. The shortage of winter housing

has become so acute that the vast bulk of these residents are now housed in trailers interspersed within citrus groves. While they, for the most part do not tend to directly compete with the indigent for available housing, their presence does tend to inflate local housing costs, and, of course, places extreme pressure on the adequate provision of other services as well during these months.

As might be expected, other concomitants of poverty are also problematic within the Valley. For example, in terms of health, the region has the highest rates of tuberculosis and typhus in the state, and ranks second in polio. We would undoubtedly find, given the available statistics, the area's population also having some of the highest rates of malnutrition, illiteracy, violent death, criminal victimization and incarceration, etc. It is rather obvious that relative to U.S. and even Texas standards, the Valley lags far behind on key quality-of-life indicators. But what has structured this situation? The next section will briefly consider some of the historical antecedents and contemporary conditions which have led to the exclusion of the majority of the residents from the American mainstream.

Barriers to Development

First, it is necessary to note that significant Mexican immigration into the Valley essentially followed Anglo-American settlement. Although the area was once part of Mexico, later being gained by the U. S. through imperial force, it was very sparsely populated until after the influx of Anglo settlers in the early twentieth century. Mexican immigration was thereby stimulated with the availability of farm work. Mexican entry mushroomed, however, between 1910 and 1920 as a result of the political turmoil and attendant economic crises caused by revolution. Lacking capital, having little formal education, and also having a different

cultural and linguistic background; the vast bulk of immigrants were ill-equipped to economically compete with Anglos. Consequently, Valley society was ethnically stratified from the beginning.

Lacking economic resources, the immigrants also had to contend with a system in which they had few political and civil rights. They largely were defined by Anglos as racially and culturally inferior and functionally fit for nothing more important than fieldwork. Evidence of Anglo-American ethnocentrism, prejudice, and discrimination has been particularly acute and visible in Valley school systems. Until the last few years, schools in most communities were segregated on a de facto basis. Instruction historically has been oriented towards cultural genocide through the anglicization of students and the concomitant derogation of all things Mexican. Likewise, the schools basically have failed to transmit English language skills effectively, and have tended to use inappropriate and often damaging tests and other techniques. Concomitant discrimination in employment, housing, and the courts has also denied several generations of Mexican Americans the right to equal social participation, and thus, has been important in structuring their presently low status.

While one might postulate that the problems confronting the poor are primarily the direct consequences of the legacy of Anglo discrimination, such a position would probably be both unfair and a gross over-simplification. Today in most circles, ethnic discrimination has been attenuated to a great extent. Working-class and middle-class Mexican Americans are seldom the objects of differential treatment. Even for the poor, the forms and methods of exploitaton have become more subtle. Rather, the poor continue to be trapped by a number of other conditions.

Some, particularly the more recent immigrants, are shackled by the inability

to speak English, and thus, are limited to employment in those jobs deep in the secondary labor sector. Yet, the incentive to learn English is limited to a great extent in the Valley since the majority speaks Spanish. Various writers have alleged that Mexican-American achievement primarily has been hindered by the persistence of a traditional peasant-type culture transplanted from Mexico. Accordingly, the poor are said to be fatalistic, unable to defer immediate gratification, overly emotional and personalistic, keenly suspicous of all groups outside the family, etc.[4] To what extent these traits actually exist, and, furthermore, actually preclude mobility, are empirical questions - of which neither have been intensively or perceptively researched as of yet. Assuming cultural traits as the primary cause of immobility is, in a very real sense, engaging in the practice of "blaming the victim." And rather than being basically impediments to upward mobility, it seems more accurate to view such traits as rational forms of adaptation to an existence characterized by the hardships, marginality, and lack of control over one's life that living in poverty usually creates.

After reviewing these factors one might be prompted to say that other immigrant groups have experienced similar conditions upon settling in the U. S. Did not the Irish and Italians, for example, begin at the bottom of the economic structure of the North? Like Mexican Americans, they were culturally different, and also faced exclusion and discrimination from the dominant society. Yet, were they not able over the course of several decades to appreciably rise in the stratification system?

The Mexican-American experience in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, however, has been qualitatively different from that of other groups in at least two crucial ways. First, the other groups entered a rapidly expanding urban-industrial economy. Although they started out at the bottom, they could over

time work themselves up the job hierarchy into relatively well-paying positions. Even at the lowest rungs of the industrial system, wages were at least sufficient for basic subsistence. Secondly, while job competition was keen, they could develop a semblance of employment security through the skilled nature of their work and/or with the emergence of labor unions.

The Valley economy, conversely, has been and continues to be strongly dependent upon agriculture and agricultural-related activities. There is a severe lack of industrial manufacturing. While industries might be attracted to the region because of its low prevailing wage-scale, this to an extent, is off-set by the generally low skill level of the local labor force. The biggest factor hindering industrial development, however, is geographical location. Tucked at the southern-most tip of the U. S., long distances separate the Valley from population centers and major markets. This locational disadvantage is compounded by exceedingly high intrastate railroad freight rates.

Even if the Valley could develop a significant manufacturing sector, under present immigration policies and practices higher standards of living for the Mexican-American masses would still be problematic. Currently, employers (particularly those in agriculture) are able to minimize labor costs by the presence of large numbers of legal, quasi-legal, and illegal alien workers. Legal Mexican workers, so called "green-carders," tend, on the whole, to live in Reynosa and Matamoros and commute across the border daily to work in the U. S. While they are theoretically limited to employment in those occupations in which shortages have been certified (so as to prevent "adverse effect"), in practice, the regulations are laced with a sufficient number of loopholes to render certification meaningless. Employment competition, secondly, comes in the form of "white-carders," aliens limited to a three day's visit per trip and confined to within 150 miles of the border. Forbidden to work

while in the U. S., a great many in practice are employed as domestics and farm laborers. The third category of Mexican workers are those who enter by circumventing all legalities. Although the bulk of "wetbacks" in the past usually attempted to remove themselves from the border region as quickly as possible in order to increase their chances for escaping detection, recent policy changes have undoubtedly weakened this incentive. Apprehension of illegal aliens has been greatly curtailed in the past year due to "inadequate appropriations." While statistics are unavailable for all but the first type of alien or their impact on the viability of the indigenous labor force, it seems reasonable to conclude that the general effects are the significant depression of wages and the displacement of Mexican-American workers. Furthermore, the widespread employment of aliens seriously jeopardizes the ability of American citizens, particularly those in agriculture, to successfully organize themselves as a labor collectivity.

What Might Be Done?

If humans actually operated under the assumptions of classical economic thought, one might surmize that the Valley's severe conditions should not exist. Given a "rational" economic man, those Mexican Americans with marginal livelihoods would move northward to regions possessing greater opportunity. But severe costs of a non-economic nature undoubtedly would be paid by those who find a strong sense of identity and belonging within a cohesive extended family network and bi-cultural region. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that the Valley is a region of flux, and out-migration has occurred to a great extent since World War II as many Mexican Americans have moved to such places as San Antonio, Houston and Dallas; and as a portion of those in the migrant stream have settled out in Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, etc. This movement has not appreciably

lessened demographic pressures on the economy. however, because of the high birth rate within the Valley, the on-going but undetermined, in-migration from Mexico, and the continued work-force participation of aliens. In fact, out-migration has probably weakened the long-range capability of the Mexican-American community by draining it of some of its most promising and ambitious members.

The concept of population transfer or relocation obviously is not a panacea, particularly if it entails the poor moving to the barrios of a San Antonio or a Houston with present skill levels. Clearly the human resource potential has been neglected in the Valley. Given the failure to industrialize, though, there has been little accompanying incentive for the upgrading of occupational skills. If prefaced with manpower training programs that were realistically geared to providing the necessary skills for jobs that are in demand, a population transfer program would be an attractive alternative for many of the Valley poor. Indeed, Hansen and Gruben suggest that "... comprehensive relocation assistance would be more efficient in increasing income and employment opportunities for Mexican Americans in South Texas than efforts to attract industry to the region."[5] That the idea is an essentially sound one has been established by the Ling-Tempco-Vought experience. Almost 700 Valley Mexican Americans were trained in 1967 by LTV for aircraft assembly, and were relocated in the Dallas-Ft. Worth area. Two years later, over 75% of the workers were still on the job.[6] The labor economist Lamar Jones posits that a strong case can be made for relocation subsidization through the federal government. Accordingly, alien commuters should be considered as "resource imports," and therefore, displaced domestic workers should be eligible for relocation allowances under the Trade Expansion Act.[7]

Further attempts similar to those promulgated under the Small Business Administration should be made to promote the development of Mexican-American owned and operated business. As such, this would lead to the growth of a larger

Mexican-American middle-class and would also strengthen the internal economy of the Mexican-American community. Interested residents should be provided technical training and financial assistance to buy externally-owned businesses or to create new ones. The rapidly expanding winter-tourist industry would seem to be one of the more promising and lucrative areas for such involvement.

Various community-oriented enterprises might be aided in establishment which would temper the vagaries of traditional capitalist forms, as well as, provide goods and services at reduced costs. A number of just such a type of operations have evolved recently in the Valley. Two of the most promising appear to be Amigos Unidos Development Corporation (funded through the Rural Housing Alliance of OEO) which supports a self-help housing program, and Amigos Unidos Federal Credit Union which provides low interest and no interest loans to low income residents.

All of these proposals are consistent with the dominant approach in the last decade to the amelioration of poverty. Operating under "war on poverty" type assumptions, they presume that the economy is basically healthy and that poverty is primarily due to low individual productivity. Yet, they (with the possible exception of relocation strategies) neglect an important consideration. If these proposals were implemented alone, their impact would probably be minimal. The Valley essentially reflects conditions characteristic of insular poverty, and therefore, policies should be geared to the provision of structural solutions. A structural attack might be mounted along three major dimensions: (1) industrialization, (2) Chicano political development, and (3) limitation of alien employment.

As previously mentioned, the Valley is beset by certain liabilities in terms of attracting manufacturing industries. Long distances from major population centers coupled with high transportation costs have apparently acted to off-set

such factors as comparatively low labor costs, a favorable climate, or any other comparative advantages that local communities might devise. Since the Valley as a whole is unattractive for industry, it seems advisable to urge a regional approach to industrial development. One such proposal is the "regional tax-break." The federal government should offer tax rates significantly low enough to neutralize locational disadvantages. While this may appear as merely another call for subsidization by the American public, it must be pointed out that the public is currently financing just such a program. Only, it is one operating from the other side of the border. Under the Mexican border industrialization program developed in the past decade, various U. S. corporations (particularly electronics firms) have located assembly plants just across the river in the "free trade industrial zone" of Mexico. A tax of only 10% is assessed on the Mexican value added to the product when it is brought back into the U. S. Since the typical Mexican wage in such operations is less than $5.00 a day and Mexico levies no export duties, the program obviously is highly profitable for participating corporations. As to other effects of the program, Briggs states:

> Tragically there is scant mention of the difficulties raised by the program on the American side of the border. Although it has reduced some of the incentive for Mexicans to cross into the United States to find employment, the Border Industries program has also aggravated the ability to attract industry and to improve wages and working conditions on the American side. The possible advantage that the prevailing low wage structure along the American side of the border (relative to the rest of the nation) might afford in attracting American industry to its environs is nullified by the even lower wages available on the Mexican side. It is absolutely impossible to conceive of a similar situation being allowed to exist and to be officially sanctioned in any other area of the United States. The Chicanos, especially those being forced out of agriculture by mechanization, now must witness the purposeful sacrifice of numerous chances for economic development, industrial diversification, and employment opportunities in their home region.[8] (emphasis mine)

While subsidization for American employment should be structured, other relevant measures should be taken as well. These would include innovations to lower transportation costs and further development of the Port of Brownsville.

A second line of attack is related to the political development of the Mexican-American community. Given the factor of numbers alone, it is clear that local Mexican Americans, as a collectivity, possess the capability for enhancing their own well-being in a very direct and immediate sense. The past decade throughout South Texas has witnessed the rapid political maturation of a significant portion of the Mexican-American population. Mexican Americans spear-headed by the Chicano movement have questioned and challenged the assumptions of direct and indirect Anglo-American domination at the local level. Most notably in the Crystal City-Wintergarden District political control has been transferred to Chicano organizations which have altered and improved policies in the schools, city, and county for their Mexican-American constitutents. Evidence of similar developments in the Valley emerged last spring as various school and city elective offices were captured by reform-minded candidates. And, even prior to this, the pressure of the brown power potential undoubtedly was integrally related to the widespread hiring of Mexican American city and school administrators, and the recent expansion in public welfare services.

Still another possibility lies in limiting the employment of alien laborers. It is clear that wage levels should not be more in adjustment with Mexican standards of living than that in the U. S. Aliens should not be employed at the direct expense and displacement of Mexican Americans. In fact, the situation has apparently developed (although in no way can I estimate to what extent) to where employment in some jobs is an economically irrational option. That is, some Mexican Americans can derive almost the same or greater benefits by not working, at least not working in those jobs for which income is reported, and

collecting aid through various programs - such as those relating to medical care, food, and housing. The widespread employment of aliens also insures fo- Valley employers a docile and manipulable labor force - one that can be easily exploited without fear of reprisals. Collective bargaining is virtually non-existent within the secondary labor sector. Nor will unionization ever be successful as long as immigration continues so relatively unabated and jobs remain so tenuous.

The issue of alien employment involves a strong humanitarian dilemma. Unemployment in northern Mexican cities is over 40%, and there are no governmentally sponsored welfare programs. Migration and subsequent employment in the U. S. is for some a life-or-death necessity. Analyses by Samora and others have pointed out, however, that the alien's position is often not enhanced through illegal entry; and that the only sure benefactors are those engaging in illegal traffic and employers.[9] Clearly the problem is international and the long-range solution lies in the development of the Mexican economy and the resolvement of a number of pressing demographic problems. Nevertheless, there should be no question as to whose welfare government policies are directed. Congressional legislation is currently pending to work toward the termination of illegal alien employment. The Rodino Bill, for example, if enacted would levy stiff penalties against those hiring such workers. But these attempts are also facing strong resistance from business and agricultural interests, and therefore, passage is highly problematic at this time.

In conclusion, there are no simple and easy solutions to the problem of Valley poverty. Indeed, relative to U. S. standards, a significant portion of Valley residents will probably be poor for sometime into the unforseeable future. It is unlikely that the Valley will soon develop a sufficient industrial base. And it is improbable that the effects of sharing a boundary with

a low income nation will be mitigated. Thus, relative poverty seems to be structurally endemic to the Valley. This is not to say, of course, that developmental programs should be abandoned. In fact, they must be vigorously encouraged and implemented if only to keep up with a deteriorating situation.

Footnotes:

1. Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council, Land Use Plan for the Lower Rio Grande Valley (McAllen, Texas: LRGVC, 1973), pp. 34-35.

2. Jones, Lamar B., "Alien Commuters in United States Labor Markets" International Migration Review (Vol. 4, Spring - 1970) p. 71.

3. These and other basic demographic and economic figures are derived from a variety of federal and state census and economic reports.

4. See for example William Madsen's The Mexican Americans of South Texas. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1965). More recent evidence strongly suggests that some of these typifications are erroneous: see W. P. Kuvlesky, et. al., "Status Projections and Ethnicity: A Comparison of Mexican American, Negro, and Anglo Youth." Journal of Vocational Behavior. (No. 1, April, 1971) pp. 137-151.

5. Hansen and Gruben, "The Influence of Relative Wages and Assisted Migration on Locational Preferences: Mexican Americans in South Texas." Social Science Quarterly (Vol. 52, No. 1, June, 1971) p. 113.

6. Ruesink and Kleibrink, "Mexican Americans from the Rio Grande to Ling-Tempco -Vought." Presented at the Industrial Relations Research Association, Des Moines, Iowa (May, 1969).

7. Jones, pp. 82-83.

8. Briggs, Vernon, Chicanos and Rural Poverty. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) pp. 46-47.

9. See Julian Samora's Los Mojados: The Wetback Story (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971).